

ENGL 121F: Composition Social Issues (Homelessness In Seattle)

Winter 2017 • University of Washington

Instructors: Shane Peterson, Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill

Overview

This composition class will focus primarily on the topic of homelessness in the Seattle area. We will approach this issue from the perspective of public health and structural violence, particularly in how the increase in homelessness rates within a certain area starts, how it impacts the surrounding community, and how local citizens should address it. By teaching rhetorical awareness, academic research skills, and creating an argument as forms of social action, my students will be able to rethink this issue in helpful ways and how to develop realistic, appropriate, and effective solutions to this complex but pertinent problem. Some questions that I would like them to consider include:

• How should we define "structural violence"? What are its causes and consequences?

Which populations are the most vulnerable? How is homelessness caused by it?

• How might we view homelessness as an issue of public health? How might it motivate others in a community to make joint efforts in raising awareness about this problem?

• What are the correlations between a city's economic/housing situation and its homeless population? What are the trends, and how can analyzing them allow us to make the necessary interventions?

• What are some manageable, local solutions that can help mitigate this problem in Seattle and other cities? Which community efforts are working, which ones aren't, and why?

Role of Service-Learning in the Course

The goal of this course is to apply the principles of academic writing to community service and engagement. Students will volunteer at a service organization of their choosing (from an approved list of organizations with some ties to the overall course theme) for 20 to 40 hours throughout the quarter. My hope is that they will use the skills and concepts that we cover in class not only through multi-modal and interdisciplinary approaches but also to further the goals of the organization that they work with and apply those same writing principles to other contexts outside of the classroom. In other words, service-oriented learning will allow them to become more active citizens and use their writing to mitigate and solve real-world problems.

Assignments Related to Service-Learning

Almost every assignment in this class will be tied to the students' volunteer activities to further emphasize the utility and transferability of the writing principles that this course teaches. For example, the first assignment will be a short rhetorical exercise in which the students will email their chosen organization to introduce themselves, ask for more information, and arrange a time to meet with them (the goal being to analyze and appeal to their direct audience). The second assignment will be an opinion editorial that they will write for Seattle Times concerning a local problem that their organization is trying to address. Then, for the first major paper, students will conduct a genre exercise in which they will create an advertisement for an event their organization is hosting, which can either be a business memo, a poster, or a webpage. Afterward, the third short assignment will be a mock grant proposal that will present a hypothetical project to a company or branch of government that could fund a student's project. The next assignment will (possibly) be an annotated bibliography to prepare their research for the next project. Finally, the final major paper will be a formal letter that they will write either to the mayor of Seattle or the governor of Washington to persuade them to take a second look at the issue the student's organization is attempting to solve.

Carlson Leadership & Public Service Center

Center for Experiential Learning & Diversity • University of Washington

171 Mary Gates Hall • (206) 616-2885 • <http://exp.washington.edu/carlson>